

Overflowing with Ministry Opportunities - by Jane Tooher, 2014

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Some people believe that a complementarian position on the ministries of men and women, stifles women and stifles the church. But that's not necessarily true. It depends on your working definition of complementarianism, and upon your practice. I define gender complementarity (as per the Values of Moore College) as an 'affirmation of the fundamental equality and mutual dependence of men and women as image bearers of God, while recognising proper differences in roles and responsibilities in life and Christian ministry.' And it's in our practice, more often than in our definitions, that complementarianism can be distorted.

Rightly understood and lived out, a complementarian position helps men and women recognise who they were created and redeemed to be, and it helps the people of God recognise the beauty of interdependence and the variety of gifting that God has given to build his church, as we take his great message of salvation of Jesus Christ to the ends of the world. Far from stifling, when properly understood, complementarianism liberates women as essential to the life and health of Christ's church.

When someone argues that women should be able to do any ministries in the church, their case is often along the lines of justice, rights, and gifting. Because these are all potentially good things, it is easy for those who believe there are some restrictions on the ministries of women to feel discouraged and marginalised. This is for two reasons.

Firstly, too often amongst both egalitarians and complementarians, the conversation is limited to ordination, and to women preaching to a mixed congregation. If these are the only options discussed, someone who believes that these ministries are beyond the Lord's limits for women is forced to become the one always saying no.

Secondly, too often those who oppose women's ordination to the presbyterate / priesthood and preaching to a mixed congregation, have a 'flat' view of complementarianism. While clear on what women should not be doing, such a view does not provide a well-rounded alternative, overflowing with ministry opportunities for women. At the same time, because the public discourse is so narrowly taken up with debates about ordination and preaching, those who do practice a well-rounded complementarianism cannot be heard above the usual clamour.

This article presumes a complementarian position, rather than arguing for one. After focusing on training women for ministry, it will list some of the many ministries in which women are and can be legitimately involved. Far from being 'flat', good complementarianism in practice is marvellously well-rounded.

Against the tendency for so many to anxiously hold onto their independence, the Bible's story of men and women created and redeemed to be together needs to be clearly heard. Because of our complementarity, men and women are never more 'independent' as when we are interdependent. One cannot be oneself without needing the other. This is a wonderful part of God's good news for his lost world.

Training women for ministry

(i) Listening to sermons

God in his mercy brings people into our churches and many of these people are women. As they sit week in week out under the sermon, with others, they are being trained

Biblically and theologically, and this training is of most benefit when a preacher works through all of God's word, book by book, so that the women (and men) in his congregation are trained in the whole council of God. By this means, all the women in our congregations are being trained in the knowledge of God for acts of service.

A key area of training that is often neglected in our churches is helping our congregation members to be better listeners of sermons. Christopher Ash's *Listen Up* is an excellent resource that briefly touches on some key points that helps women (and men) be less passive as listeners. It helps train people to expect that God will speak to them and helps them realize they should have an active role in the sort of sermons they hear at their church. *Listen Up* can easily be used as the basis for someone leading a training session at church, and this session could be as short as an hour or run for several hours. Another idea would be to do a slot on each of Ash's half a dozen points during the church service each week. These slots would be about 10-15 minutes each. Training others to listen better to sermons could be a training session led by a man or a woman.

(ii) Specific ministries

There are countless ministries in which women are already involved, and in which they can be further encouraged. What particular ministry a woman takes up will depend to a degree on her Christian maturity, gifting, stage of life, and situation in life. Some of these ministries will be more upfront, others behind the scenes. However, many of these ministries will require women to be trained to handle the word of God well. We want to train them to be Bible teachers, whether they exercise this in a one to one setting, small group, or larger context. Some women may be already interested in these roles, others will need to be invited into them by church staff and key lay leaders.

Things we need to be looking for, and training women in, are: character (Christ-likeness), conviction (belief), competency (skills), capacity (physical, emotional, relational, and mental capacity to handle the demands and discouragements of this particular ministry), and commendation (do others besides us think they should be involved in this ministry?).

It can be extremely helpful for pastors, or someone from the ministry team, to arrange a time to speak with each woman in their congregation and ask her about ministries she has been involved in previously, what she would like to do, what she is hesitant about getting involved in. By doing this even more ministries for women may open up in the life of the congregation, as each woman finds her own 'good fit', and as those responsible for congregational oversight potentially discover a wider range of opportunities for women's ministry.

Depending on where we live in the world, and the kind of women in our congregations, it can be good for some of them to have training of a more formal kind. For some, this may be a pre-college / pre-seminary program such as MTS or Cornhill. Other women might be encouraged by their church—and particularly their church staff—to engage in formal theological training at a Christian theological college / seminary at degree level, especially if the woman is considering a lifetime of vocational ministry. At the college where I work, our female students are studying both diplomas and degrees. Some are single, some married. If married, their husbands are usually also studying. Upon graduation, these women will become involved in a wide range of ministries throughout the world, and the fact that they have had the opportunity to have this formal theological education will enrich the church enormously.

The range of ministries women are involved in— and can be

Complementarianism does not stifle either women, nor the church. The following are just some of the many ministries women can be involved in: Bible translation; Chaplaincy – school, prison, hospital; Children & Youth – parish, schools, Scripture teaching, camps; Evangelism; Women – parish, university campus; Theological education; Wife; Motherhood; Overseas mission; Training people in ministry skills; Focusing on particular groups within our society that may be more vulnerable at times such as immigrants, refugees, the abused, disabled, elderly, widows, illiterate, unemployed, mentally unwell, and indigenous peoples.

Some of these ministries women will do mainly by themselves, others will be in partnership with men. Properly understood, complementarianism opens up a wide range of ministries for women, and never as a mere option, but for the necessary enrichment of the church and vitality of our gospel work.